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ABSTRACT

A followup survey was conducted of Connecticut special education graduates. Respondents included 332 young adults (57% of those sampled) who graduated from 1981 through 1984 and were identified as learning disabled (LD), socially/emotionally maladjusted, and educable mentally retarded (EMR). The survey questionnaires focused on employment, community living, and adjustment. The sample was slightly over-representative of EMR students and under-representative of LD students. Results found that 93% of the graduates were single, and only 10% had pursued any postsecondary education. Of the 85% who were currently employed, 50% worked full-time. Service occupations and clerical/sales positions accounted for half of those employed. Seventy-nine percent lived with relatives, with 15% receiving additional money from parents weekly and 24% receiving financial assistance from sources such as relatives and supplementary social security insurance. Three-quarters of the young adults had driver's licenses and over half owned a car or truck. Most former students expressed positive attitudes about their work environment, wages, working hours, and fellow employees, but not with work benefits. A large majority were happy with their current living arrangement, and spent their leisure time listening to music, watching television, and socializing with friends. Significant differences among the groups are also discussed. (JDD)

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CONNECTICUT'S STATEWIDE FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF FORMER SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATES

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CONNECTICUT'S STATEWIDE FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF FORMER SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATES

Since the passage of Public Law 94-142 (The Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, local education agencies (LEAs) have received monetary assistance from both federal and state governments to develop and implement special education programs to meet the needs of handicapped children. There is growing interest in considering the progress made by children who have participated in these specialized programs, particularly in their transition from high school and adjustment to postsecondary education, vocational training, competitive employment and community living.

Congress has stipulated that state educational agencies (SEAs) carry out studies to examine occupational, educational and independent living status of handicapped students who have graduated from secondary school or otherwise left special education (Section 618(e)(1), PL 98-199). Prior to this Federal impetus for longitudinal studies, there had been efforts to gather information from students who had received special services while in school. Interpretation of results, however, was confounded by differences in definition and methodology across the studies which had been done. Socioeconomic background, age, sex, and geographic location of subjects also influenced results.

Studies of former educable mentally retarded (EMR) students have yielded divergent findings. Regarding employment, Dinger (1973) found that 48% were successfully employed. Brolin et al. (1975), however, reported a 56% employment rate while Coonley (1980) cited an 89% rate. Investigations of adjustment among EMR adults suggest that these individuals are less socialized than non-handicapped adults in terms of participating in community organizations, voting behavior, friendships and marriage (Crain, 1980; Dinger, 1961; Redding, 1979).

Several studies have focused on long-term follow-up of children with learning problems. Hermann (1959), in an investigation of reading disabled adults, found that 50% of his sample held skilled jobs. The results of other studies of learning disabled (LD) adults in the 1960's (Balow & Bloomquist, 1965; Rawson, 1967; Silver & Hagin, 1967) must be cautiously considered due to variance in definitions and procedures used to select sample populations.

Laufer (1971) found that among formerly diagnosed reading disabled persons, 36% required psychiatric help as adults. In a study with adults diagnosed as dyslexic in childhood, Frauenheim (1975) determined that 80% held jobs in the semi-skilled or unskilled classification, or were unemployed.

White, Schumaker, Warner, Alley and Deshler (1980) surveyed LD and non-LD young adults and reported several significant differences between the groups. Learning disabled adults were found to be holding jobs with less social status and were less involved in recreational activities and social organizations. These young adults were also less satisfied with their school experiences and received more support from professional counselors.

Vetter (1983) conducted a detailed study of LD and non-LD young adults and found a number of differences. The LD group was less satisfied with their social life, came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, were more dependent on their families in that many lived with them, and pursued education after high school in fewer numbers than non-LD respondents.

Information pertaining to students identified as emotionally disturbed (ED) while in school is sparse. McAfee and Mann (1982) conducted an extensive review of the post-school adjustment of adults previously classified as EMR, LD, or ED. However, findings in their review are equivocal, contradictory or incomplete.

Results from a survey conducted for the Colorado Department of Education by Mithaug and Horiuchi (1983) suggested that most mildly handicapped graduates (69%) were employed, although a large proportion earned less than $3.00 per hour. The largest percentage of former students (64%),

including mentally retarded, perceptual/communication disordered, emotionally/behaviorally/disturbed and physically handicapped, lived with relatives. Attitudes of the graduates toward their lives were generally positive.

Hasazi, Gordon and Roe (1985) reported that 55% percent of the 301 former mildly handicapped Vermont students they interviewed were employed in paid jobs and that males (66%) were more likely to be employed than females (33%). Most of the graduates (84%) found their jobs through a "self-family-friend network." Hasazi et al., also found a significant relationship between percentage of time employed since high school and such variables as holding parttime and summer jobs during high school, program placement and the manner of exit from high school. The authors cautioned against generalizability of these findings in light of the rural characteristics of the state in which their investigation took place.

Within the State of Connecticut, there have been efforts to learn more about the post-high school lives of mildly handicapped adults. Kennedy (1966) conducted a longitudinal study of 256 mildly retarded and 129 normal subjects. Findings indicated that 83% of the retarded and 95% of the normal subjects were employed. Fifty-one percent of the retarded and 45% of the control group were married; 79% of the retarded and 95% of the non-handicapped had never been

arrested. Most of the mildly retarded were self-supporting. Efforts have also been made at the local level to gather data from high school graduates (McGraw & Tuskin, 1982; Westport Public Schools, 1983), and undoubtedly, there are additional LEAs within the state which have carried out such studies.

Despite these efforts, definitive statements regarding the adjustment, employment and independent living status of EMR, ED, or LD adults are difficult to make given differences in samples, methodology, and time periods during which studies were conducted. The Federal mandate to carry on follow-up research provided the impetus to gather information from adults who had participated in special education so that recommendations concerning policy and programming could be based upon current data regarding the adult lives of these mildly handicapped persons.

With this in mind, the State of Connecticut initiated its first follow-up survey of special education program graduates in the Winter of 1986. The goals of the study were two-fold: 1) to develop a questionnaire for use with mildly handicapped high school graduates, and 2) to collect descriptive information through the use of this questionnaire regarding various aspects of the lives of former students who graduated from 1981 through 1984 and were identified as learning disabled, socially/emotionally maladjusted, and educable mentally retarded while in high school.

METHOD

Sample

Exclusive of speech impaired children, students within the state making up the largest proportion of handicapped youngsters are the learning disabled (LD), socially/emotionally maladjusted (SEM), and the educable mentally retarded (EMR), or mildly handicapped who were the focus of the study.

The sample was selected using a multistage sampling procedure. After a sample size of 600 was determined to be optimal based on economic considerations, the following steps were taken. Local education agencies were first stratified into six city and town sizes as defined by the state using 1980 census data (Condition of Education, 1982). These included large cities, fringe cities, medium cities, small town suburban, small town emerging and small town rural. The proportion of graduates in each of the 185 cities and towns was estimated and then multiplied by 600 (the sample size). This determined the number of graduates to be sampled within each stratum.

Likewise, the number of LD, SEM, and EMR graduates to be sampled at each level was determined. Based upon statewide incidence rates, the proportion of LD, SEM, and EMR graduates was estimated and multiplied by the number of graduates to be sampled within each stratum. These numbers were then divided

by the number of LEAs selected within a stratum. The result was the number of LD, SEM, and EMR graduates within a chosen LEA to be randomly selected.

To select LEAs, the number of 1981-84 graduates for each LEA was estimated. Then, about one quarter of the LEAs within a stratum were sampled with probabilities proportionate to size.

A key element in conducting the survey was the willingness of local school districts to provide information about special education program graduates. Such cooperation was enlisted through a letter explaining the purposes of the project sent to the 40 directors of special education services whose districts had been selected. Assurances of confidentiality and directions for selecting students who graduated from their schools for the period 1981 through 1984 were included in this letter. Each LEA was asked to submit the following information for a specified quota of LD, SEM, and EMR former students: student's name, sex, mailing address, telephone number, year of graduation, type of handicap and chronological age.

Thirty-seven of the 40 LEAs agreed to participate. Because of the small percentage of the total sample represented in the three LEAs which did not participate, no replacement LEAs were contacted.

Instrumentation

Since this study was to be conducted by use of a mailout Questionnaire to be completed by former students, several factors were considered in developing the survey instrument. Given the makeup of the sample, directions had to be clear with simple vocabulary and sentence structure. The number of items had to be limited to insure attention, interest, and, thus, an acceptable response rate. Questions of a highly personal nature were not included. Three general factors were of interest: employment, community living, and adjustment.

Based upon a review of the literature (Baller, 1936; Brolin, 1975; Coonley, 1980; Dinger, 1961; Frauenheim, 1975; Hasazi et al., 1985; Hermann, 1959; Kennedy, 1960), variables such as employment rate, types of jobs held, wages earned, means of finding current employment, job history, and job satisfaction were included to gather data about respondents' employment history. Information about community living and adjustment was obtained through items such as current living arrangements, mobility, independence from parents, attitudes regarding various aspects of adult living, relationships with fellow employees and peers, postsecondary and vocational training activities, and leisure time activities (Bobroff, 1955; Coonley, 1980; Dinger, 1961; Frauenheim, 1975; Laufer, 1971; White et al., 1980).

To validate the Questionnaire, professionals including supervisors of special education services, university faculty, teachers of LD, SEM, and EMR students, and graduate students in special education reviewed the instrument, using a five-point Likert-type scale to rate content validity, readability level of items, clarity of directions, length and format. Prior to the actual survey, the High School Graduate Follow-up Questionnaire was pilot-tested with high school students completing their final year of school. These students were similar to students who participated in the actual study with respect to handicap. As a result of this phase of the project, adjustments were made in directions, wording of items, number of response choices for attitudinal questions, and length of the instrument.

Data Collection

Questionnaires with stamped, return envelopes were mailed to former students with an explanation of the survey and directions for filling out the 40-item form. As an incentive to respond, students were given a choice of receiving a $5.00 check or having a donation in that amount made to the student activity fund of their former high school. Forty of the 332 respondents contributed to their schools.

Three to four weeks after the initial mailing, another survey was sent to each non-respondent. Subsequent to this

mailing, a total of 70 telephone interviews were conducted by administering the Questionnaire orally in order to increase the response rate.

RESULTS

A total of 332 of the 582 LD, SEM, and EMR program graduates (57%) responded to the survey. About 73% of the non-respondents had either no forwarding address or no current telephone listing.

To assess the representativeness of this sample, the expected and actual proportions of students by type of handicap was determined. As can be seen in Table 1, the sample was slightly over-representative of EMR students and under-representative of LD students.

Table 1

Percent of Students According to Exceptionality

	LD	SEM	EMR
Statewide Expectations	63 %	27 %	10%
Actual in Sample	57.5%	26.5%	16%

Concerning differences between respondents and non-respondents, chi-square analyses indicated that there

were no significant differences between the two groups on handicapping condition, months since graduation and sex. A t-test for age indicated no significant difference between groups on this variable. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that there was no sampling bias due to these variables. Results of the survey are presented according to four categories: background information, employment, community living, and adjustment.

Background Information

Table 2 describes the sample in terms of year of high school graduation, size of community, and sex. It should also be noted that 86% were 21 years of age or younger, with a mean age of 21. Most (93%) were single. Few (10.4%) pursued any form of postsecondary education (community or four-year college, university, trade or business school, adult evening classes) following graduation.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Table 2

Sampling Distributions for Selected Variables

VARIABLE	% OF RESPONDENTS
Year of High School Graduation	
1984	35%
1983	32%
1982	20%
1981	13%
Size of Community	
Large City	19%
Medium	21%
Fringe	30%
Small Town Suburban	15%
Small Town Emerging	7.5%
Small Town Rural	7.5%
Sex	
Male	63%
Female	37%

Employment

Eighty-five percent of the graduates reported that they were currently employed; 10% were not. The remainder were either attending school or were homemakers. Figure 1 presents rate of employment data for former students according to diagnostic category.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

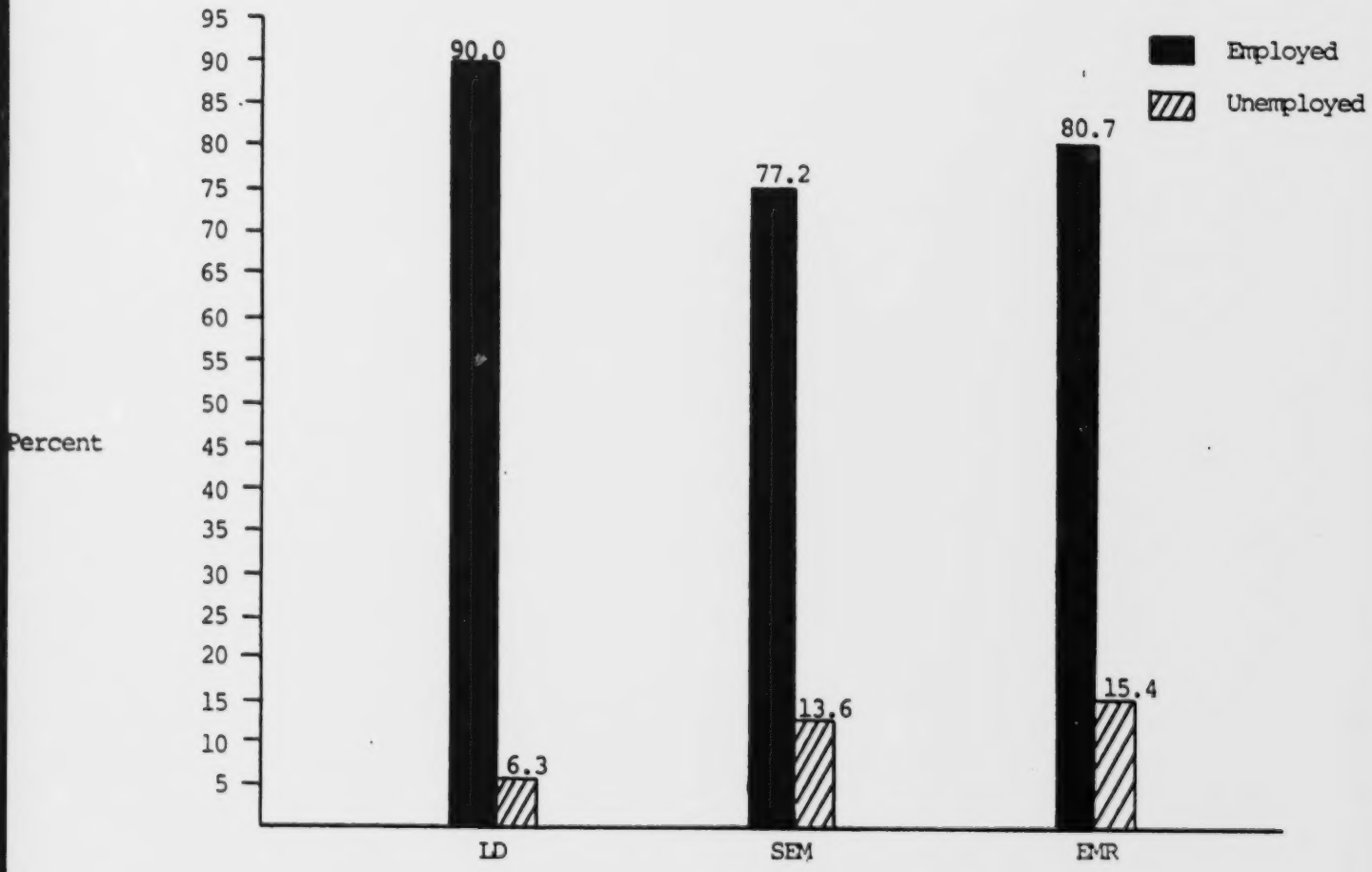

FIGURE 1. Percentage of graduates according to exceptionality who are employed and unemployed.

Employment was further defined as full-time (26-40 hours per week), part-time (25 hours or less per week), or overtime (> 40 hours per week). Among the 85% who were employed, 50% worked full-time while 26% spent more than 40 hours per week on the job. The distribution of former graduates according to category with respect to working hours is illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

Respondents were asked about their hourly wages. Among those employed, 66% earned from $3.50 to $6.50 per hour while 25% made in excess of $6.50 hourly. Nine percent earned less than $3.50 per hour. Data on hourly wages, by students' diagnostic category are presented in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Roughly half (49%) of graduates indicated that at some time since leaving high school they were without a job. Figures indicate that socially-emotionally maladjusted former students averaged the greatest percent of time unemployed since graduation (16.1%), while learning disabled were unemployed for the least percent of time (9.3%).

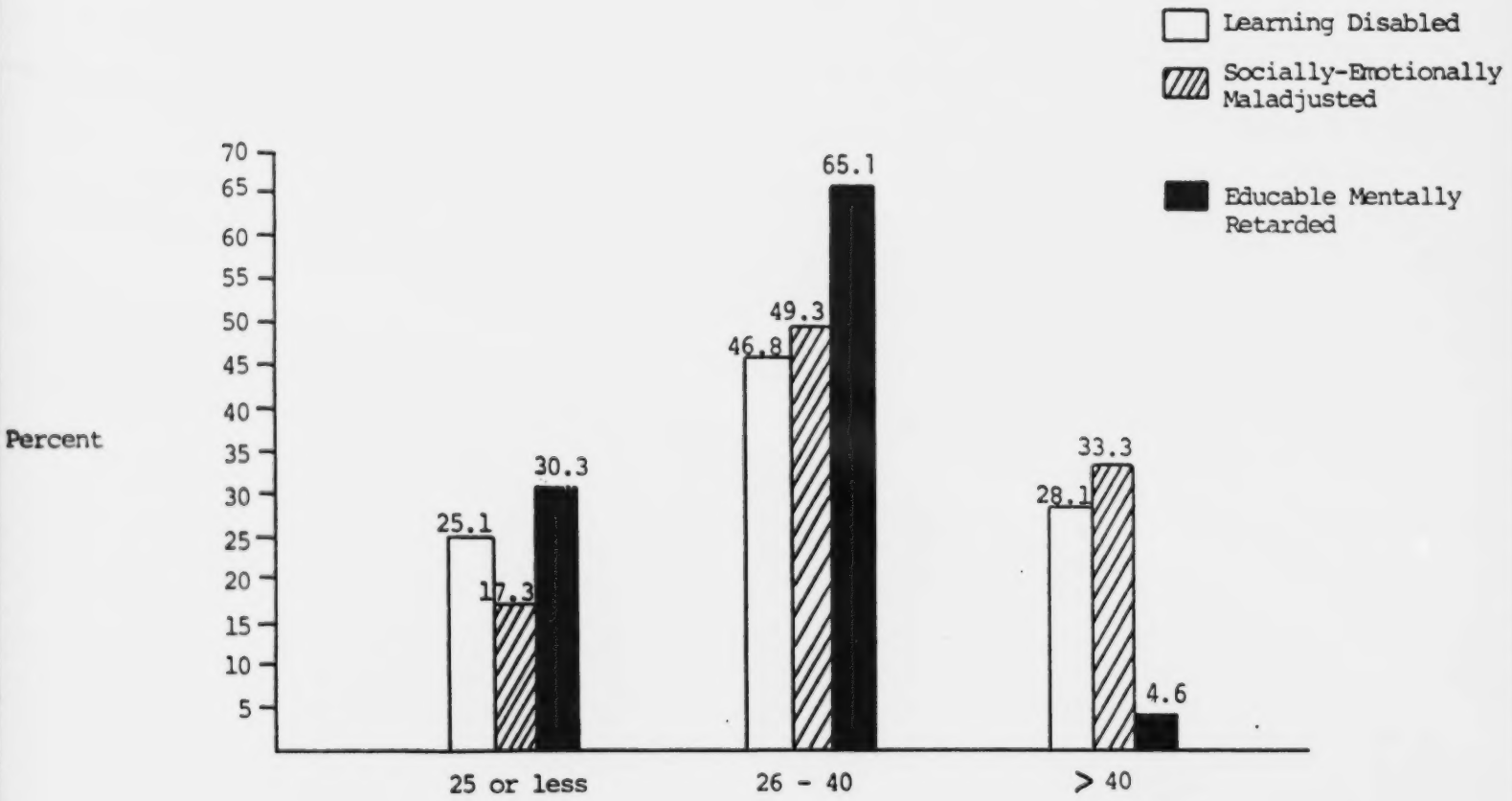

FIGURE 2. Percentage of graduates according to weekly working hours.

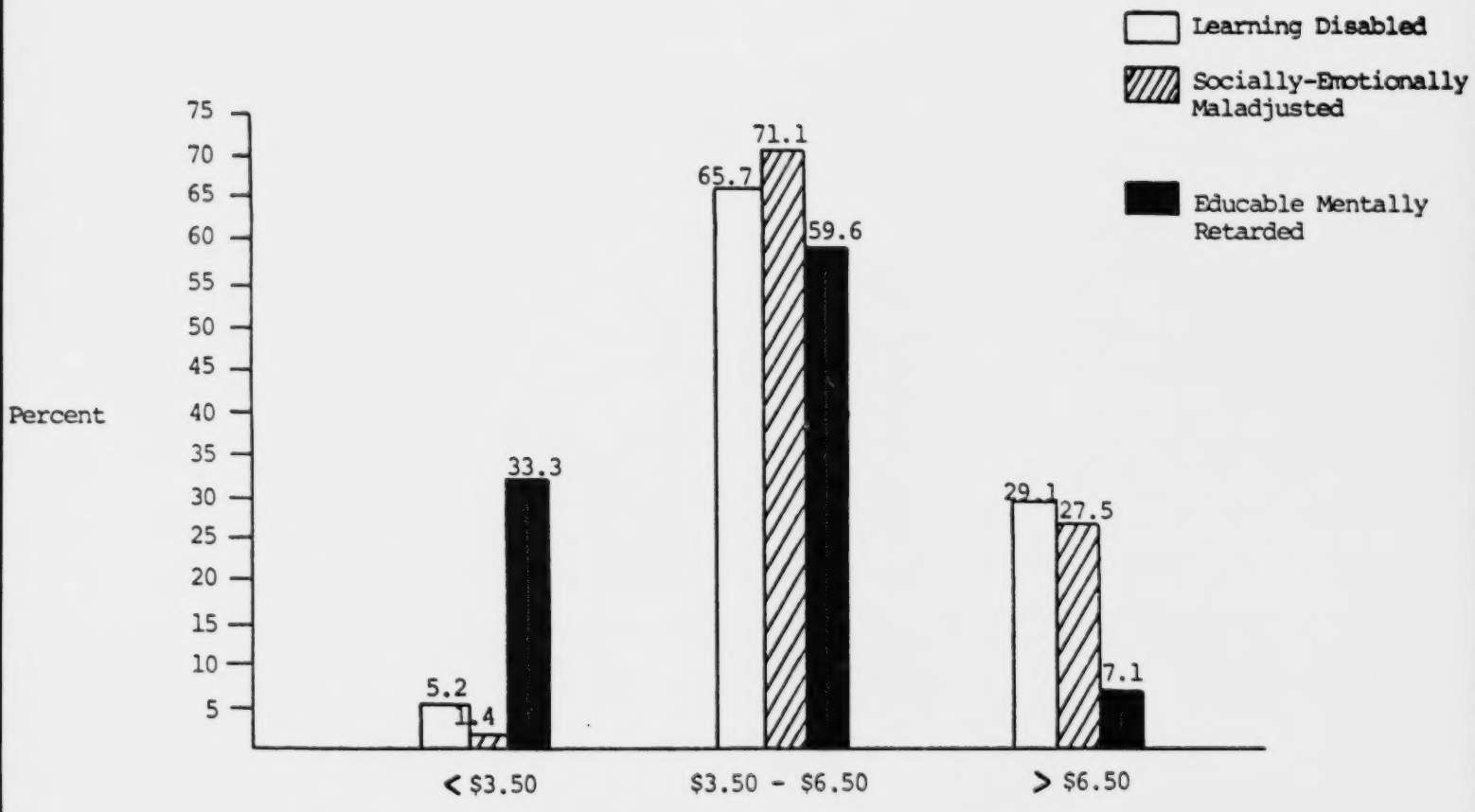

Figure 3. Percentage of those employed according to hourly wages earned.

As illustrated in Table 3, respondents held a variety of jobs, as defined by the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (U.S. Employment Service, 1977). Service occupations and clerical/sales positions accounted for half (50.6%) of those employed. Over half (53%) found out about their current jobs through personal contacts such as friends and relatives.

Insert Table 3 about here.

Community Living

Results of the survey indicated that the large majority of former students live in the same community as their parents (86%). Moreover, about 79% continue to live with relatives. While only 15% received additional money on a weekly basis from their parents, 24% reported that they received weekly financial assistance from other sources such as relatives and supplementary social security insurance. As shown in Figure 4, mildly retarded former students were more financially dependent on other sources than either LD or SEM respondents.

Insert Figure 4 about here.

Table 3

Percent of Students Employed in Occupations Specified in Dictionary of Occupational Titles

DOT CLASSIFICATIONS	% OF RESPONDENTS
Professional/Technical/Managerial	8.7%
Clerical and Sales	14.7%
Service Occupations	35.9%
Agricultural, Fishing, Foresty and Related Occupations	2.9%
Processing Occupations	2.3%
Machine Trades	5.9%
Benchwork Occupations	9.8%
Structural Work	10.9%
Miscellaneous Occupations	8.9%

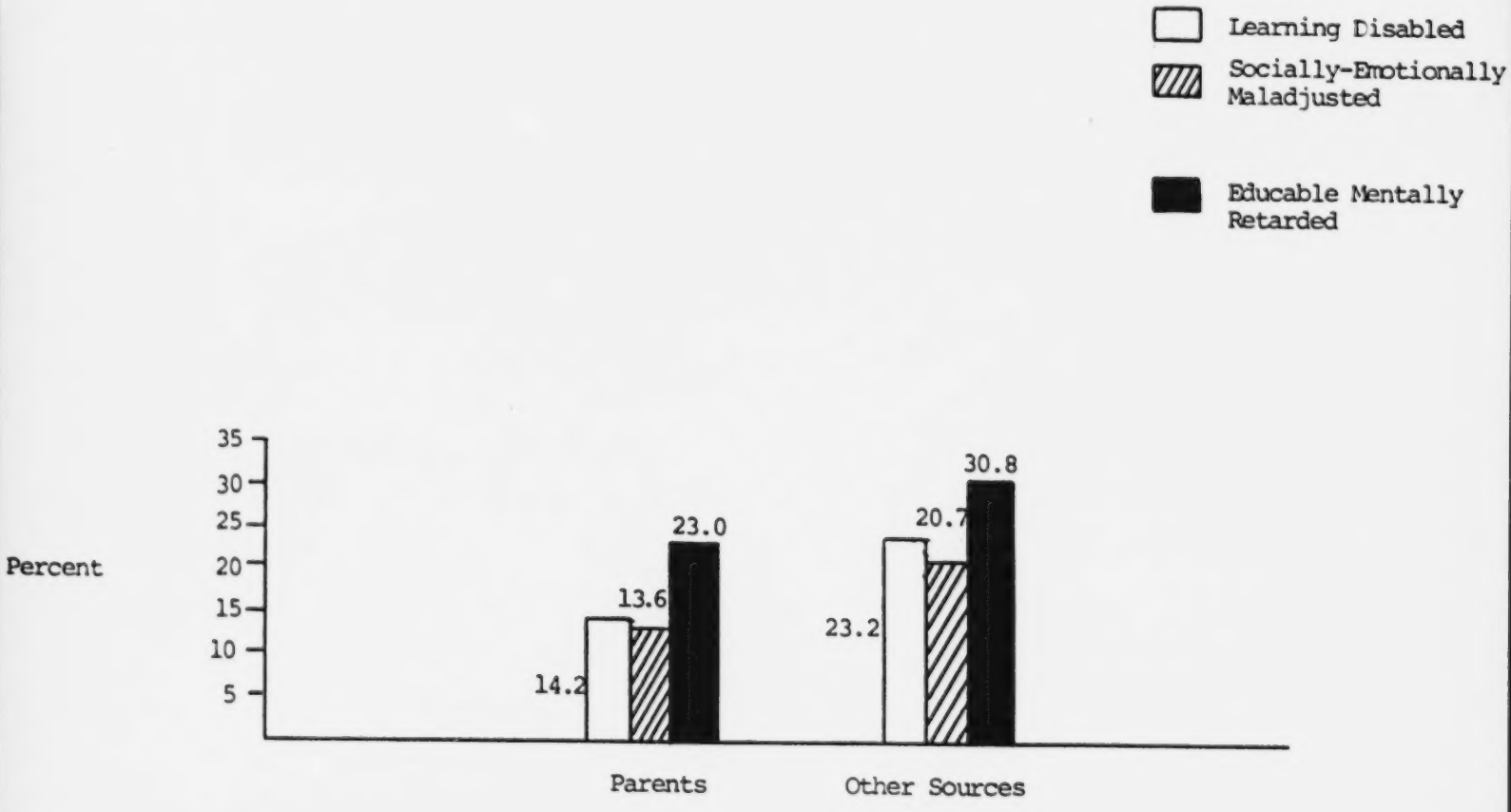

FIGURE 4. Percentage of graduates who receive supplementary weekly income.

The majority (78%) of young adults in the survey had a driver's license, and over half (58%) owned a car or truck. Few (19%) used credit cards for purchases; 37% had checking accounts.

Adjustment

Most former students expressed positive attitudes about their work environment. In addition to satisfaction with wages (66%) and working hours (87%), the vast majority (94%) were happy or very happy with their fellow employees. The one aspect of employment for which former students (37%) indicated dissatisfaction was "work benefits" such as insurance and vacation policy.

In the areas of interpersonal relationships and contact with other young adults, 87% of the respondents stated that they were happy or very happy with their current living arrangement. Three-fourths of the former students reported daily or several-times-weekly get-togethers with friends. A small percent (7%) indicated that they spend time with friends less than once per month. Most respondents (92%) were happy or very happy about time spent with peers.

The greatest amount of leisure time was spent listening to music, watching television, and socializing with friends. Reading for pleasure and recreational activities were less often pursued as leisure activities by nearly two-thirds of

the respondents. To keep up with current events, most of the young adults (71%) indicated that they use several media sources including television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. When asked whether there were aspects of their lives which they would like to change, the greatest percentage (38.3%) cited their jobs. The manner in which they take care of their finances (37.7%) was rated next.

To generate comparisons between groups for variables in the study, chi-square analyses were performed. Only those results which were significant at or beyond the .05 level of significance are presented.

With respect to employment, socially-emotionally maladjusted respondents were more likely than LD or EMR students to 1) be employed more than 40 hours weekly, and 2) have been without a job since graduation. Mildly retarded subjects were more likely than others to 1) earn $3.50 or less per hour in wages, 2) work 25 hours or less per week, and 3) have learned about their current job from a vocational rehabilitation counselor.

Mildly retarded former students were different from other respondents in community living. They were more likely to live with relatives and neither rent nor own their living place. Transportation to work by bus was more likely to occur among the mildly retarded who were less likely than

other former students to have a driver's license, own a car, have a checking account or use credit cards.

Finally, chi-square analyses indicated differences among socially-emotionally maladjusted former students with respect to adjustment. This group more than the others was more likely to report unhappiness with their current living arrangement, their job earnings and work benefits. They also indicated a desire to change their living place as well as the manner in which they managed finances.

Sex differences were apparent in these analyses in that females were more likely than males to be working 25 hours or less per week and more frequently in clerical and service occupations as well as in benchwork trades. Wages for females were more likely to be less than $3.50 per hour.

Three of the variables on the Questionnaire were continuous variables. To determine differences between groups, analyses of variance were calculated with follow-up tests which yielded significant findings. Of particular interest to the present study were results pertaining to socially-emotionally maladjusted former students. These students differed from former learning disabled and mildly retarded students with respect to number of jobs held since graduation ($F = 8.4$; $df = 2/320$; $p < .0003$). The mean number of jobs for SEM graduates was 3.4 as compared to 2.3 for EMR graduates and 2.4 for LD students. There was also a

significant difference between SEM and LD former students with respect to percent of time unemployed since graduation ($F = 4.8$; $df = 2/314$; $p < .009$). Former SEM students indicated that they were unemployed 16% of the time since graduation whereas LD students reported 9% for this item.

DISCUSSION

Before drawing any conclusions from this survey, it is important to reiterate those concerns which are often characteristic of follow-up studies. Generalizing from the sample described in this study to the general population of handicapped students must be guarded. Although the sampling plan was based upon estimates of the population characteristics, there was slight over-representation of EMRs and under-representation of LDs. Additionally, response rate is a factor to be considered as it relates to possible bias in results. Following up with former graduates continues to be a challenge given the mobility of students as they are out of school for longer periods of time. Whether longitudinal follow-up studies warrant the fiscal commitment as well as logistical concerns is a policy issue which must be addressed.

Given the scope of the present study, no attempt was made to gather data regarding former students' intelligence (IQ), achievement levels while in high school, socioeconomic

status, or type of special education placement (e.g., self-contained class, resource room). Participating LEAs randomly selected former students who were identified by the local planning and placement team while in school as LD, SEM, or EMR. Definitions of these exceptionalities are stipulated in the regulations concerning children requiring special education as per the Connecticut General Statutes and should constitute guidelines for determination of exceptionality by planning teams.

A number of results from this study present a favorable view of mildly handicapped young adults in Connecticut who received special education services while in high school. Several options exist for any student upon completion of secondary schooling: finding employment, continuing their education, enlisting in the military, assuming a role as homemaker, working to learn a skill or trade. The fact that 85% of former students who were identified as LD, SEM, or EMR while in high school are currently employed is very positive. According to the Connecticut Labor Department, the unemployment rate for the entire state at the time of the survey was 4.2%. Nationally, the rate was 6.7%. Respondents in this study who indicated that they were currently unemployed totaled 10% of the sample.

Although most respondents are employed, this does not result in financial or living independence. Most are single and continue to live with relatives. Yet figures gathered by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1985) indicate that the median age nationally at first marriage is 25.4 years for males and 23 for females. Nationally, the percentage of young adults (ages 20 through 24) who live in their parents' households was reported in 1984 as 42.2% as compared to 79% in this study. Figures of 20% and 46% of respondents living independently were cited by ACLD (1982) and Cobb and Crump (1982) lending support to the fact that housing arrangements for recent high school graduates often imply continued parental contact.

This survey's findings with respect to independent community living must also be considered within the context of a state which has a high cost of living. In 1985, Hartford ranked 10th highest among 232 cities nationally in its cost of living as measured by prices for consumer goods and services (American Chamber of Commerce, 1985). New Haven ranked 13th. It is not surprising, then, to find many students who have been out of high school for five or less years residing with relatives and frequently paying no rent or room and board.

Most former students report that they are satisfied with various aspects of their adult lives. They are involved in

interactions with friends and seem satisfied with their jobs and fellow workers. Leisure time is spent mostly with friends and in media-related activities such as television and listening to music. There was a difference in attitudes among former SEM students. This finding coupled with the fact that these respondents were more likely to have been unemployed longer since graduation raise concerns about their adjustment to demands of adult living.

Yet in spite of these generally positive findings, subtle qualitative differences point to issues of concern meriting serious consideration. Nearly a quarter of the graduates work 25 hours or less per week. This figure is higher for the mildly retarded and is reflected in their lack of financial independence. Financial assistance is received by many mildly retarded in this study and earnings at or below minimum wage raise concerns regarding their potential for independent living status. Place of employment was not specified, so future research could address issues regarding job setting as well as training for competitive employment within this group of former students.

Many of the graduates (47%) received on-the-job training following high school. It would be valuable to investigate relationships between high school programs, subsequent employment and earnings and how competitive mildly handicapped students are in the job market. Since vocational

education is appropriate to meet the needs of some mildly handicapped students, future investigations regarding graduates from these work-oriented programs could yield helpful information for educators planning curricular options. The fact that nearly 40% of the respondents indicated that they would change the manner in which they take care of money suggests that more practical experiences in money management may be useful in planning for the transition to adult status.

Figures pertaining to postsecondary education among LD and SEM graduates suggest that this option needs to be explored in greater depth during high school. Although responses indicated that 47% of SEM graduates and 36% of LD students enrolled in trade schools, community colleges and four-year postsecondary institutions, none of the SEM and only 1% of LD respondents received degrees. Furthermore, these figures regarding enrollment may be inflated due to the fact that some students may have been represented in more than one category as would be the case for someone attending a community college and then transferring to a four-year setting. Other studies (ACLD, 1982; Cobb & Crump, 1984; Fafard & Haubrich, 1981) document higher rates of enrollment for students with learning problems in postsecondary settings including vocational, community and four-year colleges. White, Alley, Deshler, Schumaker, Warner and Clark (1982)

note that more than half the secondary learning disabled population are expected to seek postsecondary training. Early transition planning addressing the possibility of and preparation for further education beyond high school, constitutes a comprehensive approach for consideration at the secondary level to encourage qualified students to consider this option (Shaw, Byron, Norlander, McGuire, & Anderson, 1987).

Finally, the manner by which former graduates locate employment following high school indicates a pattern similar to findings of Hasazi et al. Apparently, there is a reliance on the "self-family-friend" network among respondents for finding jobs in both the Vermont and Connecticut studies. This may be productive for mildly handicapped and certainly suggests an alternative to more traditional agency-oriented approaches. Such reliance on this network may not however be appropriate for individuals with more severe handicaps. In light of the importance placed on transitional programs leading to employment (Will, 1984), investigators may wish to consider job-placement procedures as they relate to diverse special population needs.

As with most investigations of this type, definitive answers regarding handicapped adults must be qualified by virtue of a number of confounding variables. Sample characteristics, methodology, economic and personnel factors

in conducting such studies all must be addressed. Comparative data from non-handicapped high school graduates would certainly provide a useful frame of reference in considering the status of students formerly identified as mildly handicapped. The present study does, however, represent a major effort at a statewide level to look closely at the adult status of individuals who have participated in special education.

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